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VENEZUELA: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO *EL NACIONAL*

QUESTION: PLEASE PROVIDE INFORMATION REGARDING U.S. AMBASSADOR TO VENEZUELA DONNA HRINAK'S VISIT TO CARACAS DAILY *EL NACIONAL* YESTERDAY? WAS THE ISSUE OF INTIMIDATION BY CHÁVEZ SUPPORTERS RAISED WITH THE VENEZUELAN GOVERNMENT?

A: TO SHOW SOLIDARITY WITH "A FRIEND OF THE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION," U.S. AMBASSADOR TO VENEZUELA DONNA HRINAK VISITED THE OFFICE OF CARACAS DAILY *EL NACIONAL* ON TUESDAY, JANUARY 8. SHE EMPHASIZED THAT DEMOCRACY CANNOT EXIST WITHOUT FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION. THE AMBASSADOR NOTED THAT, WHILE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION INCLUDED THE RIGHT TO PROTEST PEACEFULLY, IT ALSO INCLUDES THE RIGHT AND DUTY OF THE MEDIA TO CONTINUE INFORMING THE PUBLIC. THE DEFENSE OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION HAS BEEN A CENTRAL ELEMENT OF THE SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS PROCESS AND IS VITAL TO THE

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**HEMISPHERE. THE DEPARTMENT FULLY SUPPORTS THE
AMBASSADOR'S VISIT AND COMMENTS.**

[Background: Both Ambassador Hrinak's visit and the Department Spokesman's statements were reported on the front page of today's edition of *El Nacional* and carried widely by other newspapers, radio, and television.

Over the past several days, pro-Chávez supporters, goaded by Chávez's own rhetoric, have acted to intimidate opposition politicians. Previously, Chávez rhetorical intimidation has not resulted in overt acts of intimidation. Growing political conflict threatens the democratic process and stability in Venezuela.

On Saturday, January 6, dozens of pro-Chávez demonstrators assaulted opposition lawmakers as they tried to leave Venezuela's National Assembly following a marathon session of heated debate that re-elected a Chávez ally to the presidency of the National Assembly. Hundreds of police deployed to contain the violence. Chávez called the violence a "warning" to the opposition and threatened to deploy supporters on "every street corner" to "defend the revolution."

On Monday, January 7, an estimated 100 pro-Chávez supporters besieged the offices of leading Caracas daily *El Nacional*. This demonstration came one day after President Chávez accused the paper of waging a propaganda war against his government, publishing lies, and exaggerating the opposition to his government. The demonstrators prevented newspaper employees from leaving the newspapers headquarters for several hours. National Guard troops successfully blocked the crowd from entering the newspapers' headquarters. A water canon was used to disperse the demonstrators.]